





Virtual REALITY

Real POSSIBILITIES

Discovering New AVenueS to Outcomes in Child Welfare

By Molly Tierney

TWO years ago, Accenture presented a vision for using virtual reality (VR) in child welfare. That vision came to life as the Accenture Virtual Experience Solution (AVenueS)—a learning tool that the Accenture team imagined would be invaluable in helping prepare caseworkers for the field.

Two years later, early adopters across the country have shown us that AVenueS is a tool for what we envisioned and much more. The Georgia Division of Family and Children Services and the Indiana Department of Child Services are among the collaborators that have been peeling back the layers of VR's potential in the important work of child welfare.

After noticing the prevalent use of VR for training in other fields, my colleague, Valerie Armbrust, and I devised a plan to bring this capability to child welfare. The result was AVenueS, with an initial scenario of a virtual home visit. Wearing VR goggles, the user takes up the caseworker role, hears a report that a child is being mistreated, and visits the child at home. In that virtual home, the user practices observing, asking questions of each family member, and interpreting their behavior. At the end of the experience, the user makes a critical decision: Is the home safe enough for the child? Or should the child be removed from their family? This individual experience is followed by a seminar where users work together to unpack their experiences—a precursor to transferring what they learned to their day-to-day activities.

As we created the solution, we imagined it would be invaluable in helping prepare new workers for the field. However, agencies in Georgia and Indiana have helped us realize how limited our thinking was. Their current and planned implementations have unearthed other use cases for this tool—highlighting important opportunities to use VR across the practice of child welfare.

USE CASE 1: OPTIMIZING TRAINING

Our original vision for AVenueS was to better prepare caseworkers for the challenging and delicate

situations they will face in the field. As Laurence Nelson, Director of Training and Professional Development at the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services, explains, simulation is critical to preparing child welfare caseworkers.

“In child welfare, you’re dealing with children’s safety and people’s lives. Often caseworkers are experimenting and learning in situations where families are at their most vulnerable,” he shares. “Medical, military, and law enforcement professionals all have many opportunities to practice and simulate the real-life aspects of the work. Yet child welfare doesn’t usually have those opportunities.”

Nelson’s agency has invested in a simulation space designed to help create those opportunities. The in-person simulation provides new caseworkers with a safe space that engages all five senses. It gives them a chance to react and improvise to complexities they are likely to encounter in the field. Though highly effective, the simulation space is also resource intensive to maintain and time consuming to deliver.

Nelson is planning to pilot AVenueS as a more convenient and cost-effective complement to the real-life simulation space. He estimates that VR will cost up to 75 percent less than the in-person simulation space. Yet VR training will still provide a viable way for caseworkers to practice observing families and ask questions in a venue that is safe and does not put children at risk. He also cites VR’s strengths in driving caseworker efficacy in terms of establishing a correct approach to decision making. And once in-person training can resume following COVID-19 shutdowns, Nelson says the small groups used in AVenueS workshops are likely to be well suited to social distancing guidelines.

The Indiana Department of Child Services is using AVenueS for training—but not in the way that my colleague and I originally imagined. As CIO Kevin Jones explains, the department is using AVenueS as a performance management tool—enabling them to pinpoint areas where training needs to be tweaked or additional instruction is needed.

“We have a multigenerational workforce,” Jones says. “Training that was effective for one generation and their life experiences may not be right for a different generation. We are using AVenueS to help us identify gaps in our training and development programs so we can address them and improve performance.”

USE CASE 2: VETTING CANDIDATES

Some states struggle with caseworker turnover rates that should be considered catastrophic. After the enormous effort and expense to approve and post a position, sort through applicants, interview, hire, and train, they send the new hire out for their first home visit.

That home visit is when new hires first experience the intensity of the core work of child welfare. Too many realize quickly that this work is not for them and resign in a flurry. It’s a little akin to an individual going to medical school without first confirming they can stand the sight of blood. Using AVenueS during interviews exposes candidates to the nature of the work so they can incorporate that into their thinking as they consider a job in this field. What’s more, carefully framed follow-up questions as a part of the interview process mean the state can better assess a candidate’s fit to the work of the agency.

The Indiana Department of Child Services has deployed AVenueS to job fairs, where recruiters encourage prospective candidates to complete the experience before they even apply for a family case manager (FCM) job.

“As a system engineer, I had previous experience using VR and augmented reality,” says Jones. “My focus has been using AVenueS for risk management—to deliver an experience and then monitor and manage it to mitigate risk.”

As Jones notes, federal rules prohibit child welfare agencies from sending any prospective caseworkers into the field: “With AVenueS, we can give them real field experience and really evaluate if someone is a good fit for the position,” he says, adding that the department reduced turnover by 18 percent in 2019 due in part to the support of VR.



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Looking to the future, Jones envisions developing numerous additional scenarios, not only for the family case managers, but also for the vast legal resources within the Department of Child Services.

“We are the largest ‘law firm’ in the state with hundreds of attorneys who practice family law. We want to use hours of simulations to improve our attorneys’ effectiveness in litigation, much like pilots do repetitive simulations,” he says. “Nothing in law school prepares you for what can happen inside a courtroom where you’re the lawyer making a case to take away someone’s child. VR can prepare an attorney for that reality.”

USE CASE 3: CHALLENGING SEASONED WORKERS

The first AVENueS pilot at the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services focused on delivering the experience to seasoned workers. By going through the virtual home visit, experienced caseworkers and supervisors were able to identify some of their own unconscious biases.

“I think it became apparent how much fear goes into decision making, especially for veteran staff,” Nelson notes. “People often err on the side of caution, but sometimes removing a child from their home is the wrong decision. The experience also revealed how irrelevant factors can play too great a role in making a decision.”

In other words, the reflective work in this kind of seminar enables seasoned workers to get out of “auto-pilot” mode. Workers, who have been at their task for years or decades, risk falling into a set of behaviors that inhibits the use of their full skill set. AVENueS helps them re-awaken and focus more clearly on the pressing and presenting questions in child protection cases.

“We had explored VR technology some years back, and we decided that it felt too much like a game,” Nelson recalls. “AVENueS feels completely real. You can see folks as they are interviewing the characters and getting frustrated—reactions that happen in real life.”

Nelson sees the value of VR in the child welfare industry. “This is the

future of training for child welfare because we must have these opportunities to practice. We can’t rely on memorizing policy or going on ‘gut feeling’ of what’s right and wrong. We need opportunities to know the right and wrong decisions—and why we made those decisions.”

Jones agrees that virtual/augmented reality is a powerful tool that triggers a subconscious response.

“I can read a book or watch a video and not trigger my subconscious response,” Jones says. “But this requires you to fully engage. Your hearing and peripheral vision are focused in the experience, and it requires you to read the questions, interact with the characters, and think strategically about how you would approach the situation.”

He adds that Indiana is also using AVENueS to help long-time family case managers (FCMs) identify their implicit biases. “It helps them be more introspective in terms of ‘Do I have gender bias, racial bias, or bias toward kids in certain situations?’ Those biases are developed over time. The VR scenarios can help FCMs start to think about how those patterns may have negatively or positively affected the outcomes for children.”

USE CASE 4: EDUCATING INFLUENCERS

Finally, another unplanned way to use AVENueS is with influencers, many of whom stand outside of child welfare and judge (sometimes harshly). AVENueS provides a way for these influencers—including monitors, legislators, and journalists—to “walk a mile” in a caseworker’s shoes. Giving those individuals a realistic understanding of the immeasurable challenges child welfare workers face positions them to be more helpful in the roles they take up in these systems.

AVENueS AHEAD

When we started, we did not imagine this array of possibilities for AVENueS. With early adopters working with us side by side, we are broadening the possibilities for VR technology in child welfare with each passing month. 📺

